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Post Plop

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Translator: Charles Penwarden



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Lecomte-Depoorter, Isabelle. *Le Pop Art*, Paris : Flammarion, 2001, (Tout l'art / Grammaire des styles)

Obalk, Hector. *Andy Warhol n'est pas un grand artiste*, Paris : Flammarion, 2001, (Champs)

Warhol, Andy. *Ma philosophie de A à B et vice-versa*, Paris : Flammarion, 2001

Les Années pop, 1956-1968. Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2001

- 1 Some forty years after it all started, Pop Art and “the Pop years” have turned into the constellation that was the subject of the exhibition of the same name at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, *Les Années pop*, and of a number of supplementary publications which are certainly not exhaustively covered in the list below. So, which should we read, or rather reread, and above all, why, and for whom?
- 2 Let's begin with the catalogue published by the Pompidou, or rather with the publication of what Mark Francis, the man behind it, claims is an object that “transcends the traditional role of exhibition catalogues”. Gee! But the emphasis here is, more importantly, on a more sweeping, geographical and, if possible, homogenous revision of “two major international currents that are the basis of the period [under consideration]: Nouveau Réalisme for the first group and the Pop Arts [yes, with an s] for the second current”. The idea here is to correct the *tradition* of those “other exhibitions that treat European movements as a footnote.” All right, then. First, let's plunge into Francis's text, which serves to set out his method and aims to explain to us the novelty of what he is offering. The book is conceived as an “assortment of references, quotations and images” juxtaposed “rather like those pinboards they always had in workshops and offices in those days”, and thus transforms “archive documents that, in themselves, seem

incoherent and inexpressive, into a huge anthology of the main original documents from the period concerned". There is also "an index of the popular, vernacular arts relating to music, literature, photography, comics, fashion and television" with, furthermore, "the most important critical texts of the day: Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Reyner Banham and Tom Wolfe, sic". Last but not least, "the organisation [of this material] is chronological rather than thematic" and seeks to "determine structure and not content". Right. There follows a copious, non-paginated selection of images, approaching some 350 pages, roughly speaking—which, for reasons that remain obscure, juxtaposes sketches and full page reproductions, knocking together, just as incomprehensibly, art, movies, photographs, architecture, comix, adverts, design, magazines and TV. The sequentiality of all this is given solely by the (expiry?) dates at the top of the pages. The proportions vary considerably: some forty pages each for 1962 and 1964, about thirty for 1963, 1965 and 1968, a little less for 1966 and 1967, a score or more for 1960 and 1961 and much less for 1956, 1957 and 1958. The lowest score goes to 1959, which, with 15 paltry pages, comes across as a bad harvest or slovenly year. This assertion of chronology over discipline is certainly welcome, but on the condition that it doesn't make medium-mixing an obsession, whatever the cost. Here, though, we get lost, and all the more so because we (I) may have had the impression that our (my) memories of the "Pop years" gave pride of place to pop music, Anglo-American art and a few films of the same provenance, and that architecture, design and, above all, television, were not as prominent as this compilation reports them being. And, to be more precise, Nouveau Réalisme and, just after it, Figuration Narrative (to limit my remarks to France), were, like it or not, accessible to a much more restricted public than the American and a few of the English Pop artists, who were popularised by the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Velvet Underground and a few others. There is a whiff of demagogic democratisation to Francis's argument. Fortunately, this is offset by the contributions of Catherine Grenier, Jean-Michel Bouhours, Martine Lobjoy and Chantal Béret, who do a pretty good job of placing their respective fields in relation to the issues of the day.

- 3 I do not have the time or space here to discuss them in proper detail, but I would urge that their essays be read and passed on.
- 4 Also, as is often the case with this author, the short book by Christophe Domino is worth looking at for its descriptions and interpretations. The chapter headings are explicit and paradoxical: "borrow/displace", "assemble/fragment", "cut/paste", "recuperate/recycle", "desire/consume", "celebrate/banalise". But my God, talk about a weird layout! The folding of the pages certainly doesn't make it easier to see the reproductions. These, by the way, in spite of the publishing copyright, include only one reproduction of a work from the MNAM collection, James Rosenquist's *President Elect. 1960/61*. Gallimard and the Pompidou Centre are thus the service providers to Pop and not the representatives of the riches in their care. They are to be congratulated.
- 5 Isabelle Lecomte-Depoorter's book is aimed at the general reader and is rather well illustrated. Divided up into chapters devoted to English Pop and its "three generations", to Nouveau Réalisme and then American Pop, which is divided up into "precursors", "New York" and "California", it ends with "the Pop constellation in Europe" (that thing again!), making no mention of Richter and Polke but giving a glimpse of Broodthaers, Panamarenko and other Belgians (the author's co-nationals). Why not? It is just a shame that the monographs on different artists are too unequal in length and that the illustrations are sometimes inadequate.

- 6 Finally, we come to Andy Warhol and the reprint of his famous book of “philosophy”, *From A to B*. There’s not a lot to say here; it’s just the reprint of this slightly indulgent and unexciting text: it may be fictional and by Warhol, but this autobiography doesn’t shed much light on the undoubted importance of his work, except and including the media and publicity foundations that Hector Obalk joyously tears into in his book. For that is the point of this reprint of *Andy Warhol n’est pas un grand artiste*: to keep digging away, unrepentantly, with a conviction that has only been strengthened by Obalk’s visit to the Pompidou exhibition. Andy is merely a publicist of genius and an excellent art director. Personally, that’s fine by me, and, to my mind, it needn’t exclude anything else. The score-settling that Obalk mentions as a pretext for this reprint at the beginning of the book (a lot of people were pretty displeased when the book came out in 1990) is purely anecdotal. We soon get beyond that. As for Warhol, great or small, we should let him be, even if the machinations of his heirs should be treated with caution, as is often the case with artist’s widows...